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SUBJECT: LEBANON: FRANK DISCUSSION AT MARCH 14 POLICY WORKSHOP

REF: Beirut 392

¶1. (U) On April 13, the anniversary of the beginning of Lebanon's 1975-90 civil war, the pro-government March 14 coalition kicked off its first workshop, one month after its convention. The workshop included two sessions: Reactions to the March 14 political document (reftel), and the Taif Agreement and Building a Modern State. More than 70 civil society representatives attended the workshop. In addition, representatives from the various March 14 political parties attended, including March 14 SYG Fares Souaid, MP Samir Franjeh, Future MP Moustapha Allouch, Lebanese Forces member Eddy Abi Lamah and representatives of senior March 14 leaders Mohammad Safadi, Amine Gemayel, and Nassib Lahoud and of Mohammad Hussein Shamseddine, an independent Shia think tank representative.

¶2. (U) In his opening remarks, Souaid indicated there were numerous reactions to the March 14 political document (reftel), including international and local ones. He noted that the document was open for debate to enrich it. He disclosed that a committee will be formed to develop it further within certain political circles as well as with the Lebanese diaspora. However, he stressed that the basic elements of the document, such as Lebanon's independence, sovereignty, and democratic political regime, will not be altered. Antoine Haddad, the coordinator of all of the March 14 workshops, said this workshop continue for three months, after which a final political document will be released.

¶3. (U) Independent Shia think tank representative, Shamseddine noted that the Lebanese state surrendered to the resistance's plan under the era of Syrian tutelage. He said that Hizballah should have surrendered its weapons to the state following the 2000 Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon that was carried out in accordance with UNSCR 425. "Unfortunately, the state of resistance was built in the non-civilian state, and the resistance, i.e. Hizballah, became a regional resistance hence making the Shia community a regional confession," Shamseddine said. He expressed wonder at how the Lebanese could find a social contract among themselves under this definition of resistance.

¶4. (U) Other participants were critical of the March 14 document, notably the section addressing the "culture of death and violence." Youssef Bazzi, a Shia from the southern village of Bint Jbeil, said March 14 should find a rhetoric that has resonance among the Shia, and added that the classification of the Shia community as a culture of violence is the incorrect approach to strip Hizballah from its supporters. Yehia Jaber, another Shia attendee, said this document reflects a culture of racism among March 14 and blamed March 14 members for failing to protect individuals who are at odds within their own confession. George Koussaifi, another attendee, blamed March 14 for not developing a political discourse that could attract independent Shia toward March 14.

¶5. (U) Amal Makarem, a Druze academic attending the workshop, indicated that all leaders should take responsibility for their own mistakes rather than blaming others. She questioned if March 14 still wants to build a state that incorporates everyone, including

the Shia community. Nabil Khalifeh, a Lebanese University History professor, asked what was the common denominator that brought March 14 leaders together, specifically that they were staunch rivals during the civil war.

16. (SBU) Comment: This is the first in a series of workshops March 14 plans to launch as part of its public outreach campaign. Although comments made by attendees were critical, the atmosphere was candid, frank, and constructive. The March 14 Secretariat will take the comments into account and build upon them before releasing its final political document in three months time. Rumor has it that MP Saad Hariri allocated USD 1.5 million for the secretariat to carry out its mission. End comment.

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